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SOME EARLY LESSONS OF THE WAR

BY A. MAURICE LOW

SIXTEEN years ago a ponderous work on a highly technical subject was the book of the hour, and to-day I wonder how many persons remember Jean de Bloch's *The Future of War*? M. de Bloch's imposing work in six bulky volumes lies before me. It is no mere treatise on the gentle art of slaughtering one's fellow-man. Its title, *La Guerre Future aux points de vue technique, économique et politique*, is sufficiently comprehensive to show the elaboration and detail with which the author viewed his subject.

Bloch based his conclusions on a few fundamental propositions that are of peculiar interest to-day. At the time he wrote the world knew nothing of modern war. The effect of modern weapons on the *morale* of the combatants, the destruction they were capable of, and the cost of a war between two or more first-class military powers were questions of intense interest to the speculative mind, but speculations only. The last great war under approximately modern conditions was fought twenty-eight years before Bloch's book appeared, but in that little more than a quarter of a century the art of war had made enormous strides. The Prussian needle-gun and the French mitrailleuse—that wonderful instrument of destruction to which the French so blindly pinned their faith—were toys compared with what ingenuity had devised during the years when inventors and scientists worked to be ready for the next conflict; and in the sixteen years that have elapsed since Bloch wrote, every year has seen greater improvements. So fast and furious has been the competition that all the Great Powers have armed and rearmed their forces half a dozen times, the explosive effects of powders have been enormously increased, a new arm has been brought into existence, and the dirigible and the aeroplane play a part Bloch could not conceive.

Basing his conclusions on the facts then known, Bloch

asserted that another great war between industrial nations would be impossible because, unless the war was speedily ended, the countries engaged would be bankrupt. He further held that the range and precision of modern weapons had rendered obsolete the former tactics of offense. Given two armies of relatively equal strength, and the attacking army would be unable to make a frontal assault, as it would be annihilated before it came to close quarters, and the enemy, fighting under the cover of intrenchments, could only be dislodged by vastly superior numbers and a series of flanking engagements. But after the enemy was dislodged its opponent would be so spent and exhausted that it would be incapable of pursuit and driving home the attack. The enemy would be defeated but not destroyed; it would have time to take a new position and behind fresh intrenchments again be prepared to do battle. A great many persons believed that Bloch was right, that the expense in blood and treasure and the industrial prostration from which the victor would suffer no less than the vanquished made war impossible, and that the great armaments and the enormous sums spent on their upkeep were simply a gigantic bluff. Every nation was afraid of every other, every nation was trying to outdo every other, but no nation intended to set its military machine in motion. So thoroughly was this believed that ignorance coined an aphorism for the shelter of indifference—"to be prepared for war is the surest means of avoiding war." That lesson of fatuousness has now been learned.

The Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War to a considerable extent discredited Bloch's theories; the present war, up to the present time, has shown that in its elementary principles there is no difference between war in the twentieth century and war twenty centuries ago. The same elements exist, the same qualities tell. The problem has become more complicated, as every problem becomes more complicated with the crowning of the centuries and the complexities of civilization, but fundamentally the problem is the same.

It is too early to discuss the technical phases of the campaign, as the data now available is insufficient, but it is not too soon to understand certain outstanding facts. Chief among them is that to-day, as in the past, the main strength of an army is its infantry, and as the Athenians at Marathon relied on their foot soldiers armed with spear and

sword, and the English at Crecy on their archers with their cloth-yard shafts, so all of the seven contending nations have staked their hazard on the infantry. The artillery has prepared the way, as it always has since artillery ceased to be merely stones slung from catapults and became a scientific weapon, but few battles in the long record of war have been won by artillery, and no battle has been lost until the infantry were put out of action. Bloch's belief that it would be impossible to send infantry against intrenched troops has been disproved, and the bayonet has again been vindicated.

On the theory that the precision and long-range effectiveness of the modern rifle had ended hand-to-hand fighting, the bayonet seemed a useless weapon and only an encumbrance to the soldier, as much an anachronism as chain armor, which might turn a sword thrust, but would not stop a bullet. The Spanish War was the first war to be fought under modern conditions, and many American officers considered the bayonet an unnecessary part of the soldier's equipment, although it was tolerated, partly for its tradition, and as being useful perhaps to open tins of meat and in an emergency to serve as an intrenching tool. As an intrenching tool the bayonet was valueless, and as a can-opener it was unwieldy, but it had lost none of its importance when the charge was sounded and cold steel came to play. In the Boer War the bayonet came into its own, and the Japanese proved its worth repeatedly. At the beginning of the Boer War the Lancers went into action with their historic weapon, but they were heavily handicapped fighting at long range against men able to come to close quarters, and the lance was abandoned for the sword, which enabled the English cavalymen to come breast to breast with their antagonists, to cut and thrust and not to be held off the length of the staff while their antagonists could get under their guard. The Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War proved that the decision of a battle depended upon the strength with which the assailant delivered the final blow, and that can only be done with the bayonet and the sword.

From the accounts made public of the present war there has been no change. Both sides have relied heavily on their artillery, which appears to have been handled with wonderful efficiency; in the same way that the size of armies has increased until the number of men engaged in battle is staggering, so the guns have multiplied, and, in addition to

the field artillery, infantry and cavalry have machine-gun sections; but after the artillery has delivered its fire the infantry has been thrown against opposing infantry, sometimes intrenched, and at other times without protection, to drive them from the field if they were able, to be driven back if the assault was too feeble. In these encounters men have fought hand to hand, bayonet against bayonet, clubbed rifle against clubbed rifle, sword against sword. Murderous as gun and rifle fire is, unless a regiment is exterminated in a few minutes the men must go forward, and after having passed through the short-range zone of fire the rifle becomes useless. It is at this moment that national characteristics tell and race psychology is the deciding factor. The soldier becomes an individual. He ceases to be a unit, a member of a section or a company; there is no longer an officer to direct him. He must be his own man, rely on his own strength, emboldened by his own courage. Troops that can stand punishment in masses may go to pieces when driven on the bayonet. Dogged determination, *élan*, an imagination so stunted that it can grasp only one idea, and that is the necessity to hack a way through, are the qualities that count when a position is to be carried by storm.

Another lesson this war has taught is the value of mobility. That was to me the striking moral of the Boer War. In the early days of the campaign the British suffered reverses because they fought on foot and the Boers were mounted, which gave a smaller force the priceless advantage of being able to select the time and place of attack, and the element of surprise was always on their side. When the British understood this they turned defeat into victory. A flying column of mounted men under General French (the present Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in France) marched ninety miles under a tropical sun in a little over four days, fought two minor engagements, forced Cronje hastily to retire from Kimberley and later surrender, and so weakened Joubert in front of Ladysmith that Buller was able to raise the siege. The successes of the Germans during the month of August, and until they were checked in front of Paris, were in a large measure owing to their mobility. They made surprising progress, and it was possible because of the perfection of their transport, which was largely self-propelled. At enormous cost—but military saving is the

most costly economy—they had substituted the motor for the horse, and their supply-trains, instead of lumbering at a snail's pace far in the rear of the army, were always at its heels, its speed regulated only by that of the infantry. In the next war—and only idealists imagine this is the last war civilization will fight—it is safe to predict that the motor will play a still more important part, and infantry, instead of being worn out by marching, will be moved in motor trucks and arrive on the battle-field fresh and vigorous. Motor transportation will enable a commander to move his troops rapidly and place them at the point in his line where the attack is heaviest or the enemy shows signs of wavering.

The motor has entirely changed siege operations. Siege artillery now throws a weight of metal that a few years ago would have been regarded as impossible, that would, in fact, have been impossible, because the guns could not have been moved except under almost insurmountable difficulties; hundreds of horses would have been required, and their progress would have been painfully slow. It was a simple operation for the Germans to bring up their howitzers mounted on "caterpillars" in front of Namur, and against the tons of metal thrown at a high angle the forts were powerless. That teaches another lesson. Faith placed in a fortress is clinging to a broken reed. A fort is useful as a base and valuable in giving support to a mobile army, but as the means of blocking the path of an enemy equipped with modern siege-guns, or with force large enough to "contain" it while the main army sweeps on, it is delusive. In 1870 the forts that were to defy the Germans were the French undoing. Metz, Strassburg, Toul, Sedan, were simply so many traps into which the French rushed. Fortunately for them, they have not clung to their fortresses in this campaign, and it is not unlikely that in the future the French will spend less on fortifications and more on their field armies, and plans of campaign for the next war will minimize the importance of these huge and costly stationary defenses.

If the war has taught anything, it has taught the value of military preparedness. Germany was ready to take the field immediately on the declaration of war. The covering troops on the French frontier were pushed forward at once, and without delay the supports were brought up while the

mobilization rapidly proceeded. The French mobilization and concentration were much slower, and the way was open for the march of the German legions on Paris if Belgium had not thrown herself into the breach. For years we have heard about the efficiency of the German military machine—and its efficiency will not be questioned—but little has been heard of Belgian efficiency, and yet Belgium was as quick to respond as her more powerful neighbor. Her army was in the field well armed, well supplied, properly disposed at the first moment of contact, and Germany gained nothing by surprise; it was Germany who was surprised by the gallant defense of Liège. The whole course of the war, certainly in its earlier stages, would have been changed had Belgium not held the Germans at bay. Had the French been able to throw the bulk of their army into Belgium in the early days of August, and the British sent at the outset a quarter of a million men instead of the sixty thousand or so that did not get into action until the 22d, a battle might have been fought on the field of Waterloo that for the second time would have decided the mastery of Europe.

It was the German Emperor's belief that he could march through Belgium and France and be thundering at the gates of Paris in three weeks; that, having reduced or invested Paris, he could send the great bulk of his army by *Schnellzug* to the Russian border and deal with Russia at his leisure with the assistance of the million or more men Austria was to put into the field. It was Napoleonic, it was perfect, and it would have worked to perfection had not German efficiency been Germany's undoing. Belgium had taken Germany as a model and was ready, Russia had learned her lesson. Military experts declared it would take Russia, under the most favorable circumstances, at least a month to mobilize, and from two to three weeks to concentrate, so that if everything went well there must be a delay of from six to seven weeks before the great military machine of Russia was in motion, and the chances were it would be two months or more before East Prussia was in danger from Russia, and meanwhile she would have her hands full with Austria. That the Kaiser believed he had time to spare to complete his western campaign is shown by his having withdrawn all but two army corps from East Prussia, and so confident was Austria that she believed it safe to send two army corps to reinforce the German army ope-

rating in Alsace. But Russia disarranged all calculations by completing both mobilization and concentration in three weeks, and as early as August 12th Russian troops entered Galicia, on the 20th they were in East Prussia, and on the same date they were engaged in a desperate battle with the Austrians in Poland. The surprise up to the time of the writing of this article has been the serious check given to the German advance by the Belgian resistance, and the celerity with which Russia assumed the offensive against both Germany and Austria.

The influence of sea power has again been demonstrated. The old lesson of history has again been learned that command of the sea makes a nation impregnable. Immediately following the declaration of war the British Navy drove the German Navy to the security of its fortified bases in the North Sea, and in two weeks the seven seas were swept bare of German commerce. The hundreds of thousands of tons of German shipping that the week before swarmed the oceans are to-day either tied up in German or neutral harbors or have been captured and taken as prizes to British and French ports. For the first ten days in August the great transatlantic liners ran irregularly, many of the ships having been withdrawn for transport purposes; since then many vessels have resumed their regular schedules, and British cruisers patrol the Atlantic from Halifax to the Channel, keeping the great trade route open, enabling Great Britain to feed her people with American foodstuffs, and sending her manufactures to American and other markets. There are a few German cruisers still at large in the Pacific and off the coast of South America, but they have done little damage and their capture is only a matter of time.

So long as Britain holds command of the sea Germany cannot win, and the moment Britain loses her control that moment Germany is victorious. Germany, like every other European country with the possible exception of Russia, is not self-contained, and is dependent upon other countries for foodstuffs and raw materials, but these she cannot procure. There are no longer German ships to bring commodities to German ports, neutrals with contraband run risk of seizure, and if trade in non-contraband springs up it will be ended by a blockade of German ports. So far Germany has contented herself with strewing mines in the North Sea, in

the hope of destroying British naval vessels, but has refused a general fleet action. Some day, and soon, that action will have to be fought, for the German people will not allow the navy on which they have spent thousands of millions of marks to lie in safety behind the guns of land fortifications. When hunger is sharply felt throughout Germany, when factories are closed because the last bale of American cotton has been woven and the last ingot of South American copper has been used, when the misery of war is brought home by suffering and sickness, then the pressure of public opinion will force the Germany Navy to go out and fight, and the German Navy will fight and give a good account of itself no matter what odds it has to encounter. The battle that is yet to be fought in the North Sea will be one of the decisive battles of history, as epoch-making as was Effingham's victory over the Armada, which destroyed the naval power of Spain and freed England from the danger of invasion. On that battle hinges the fate of England or the future of Germany. It may not bring the war to an end, but it will decide it.

In the intervals between wars there is always produced a new weapon that it is believed will revolutionize military operations. The French in 1870 were confident that the mitrailleuse, throwing its stream of bullets by turning a crank, gave them a great initial advantage over Germany, but, although the machine-guns did heavy execution, they were not the decisive factor in the war. The French also believed that the *chassepot* was superior to the German rifle, but superiority in weapons could not offset superior strategy and tactics. The Spanish-American War was to afford the first test of the torpedo-boat, those hornets of the sea whose sting is fatal. It was not the Spanish battle-ships that American naval officers feared; they could be met in open fight and destroyed, but it was the haunting dread of a destroyer dashing out some dark night, firing its torpedo, and disappearing in the murk while the great vessel went to its doom; but, as we know, the Spanish torpedo-boats did no damage. The Russo-Japanese War was to prove the value of the submarine, the latest horror of naval warfare, but it was Admiral Togo's armored ships that penned up the Russians in Port Arthur and finally smashed Russia's naval power at the battle of Tsushima. What the submarine may do before this war is over we have yet to learn.

Since two Americans taught the world to fly, the Germans have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars upon their air fleet, believing their gigantic Zeppelins would be one of their most powerful arms in the next war, a belief not shared in by other nations. The moral effect of the Zeppelin has been enormous, as great as the fear of the torpedo-boat and the submarine, and England at one time was thrown into a veritable panic by the alarming stories of German dirigibles flying over London, an object lesson kindly given by the German General Staff to show how easy it would be for a few hundred air-ships, or, for that matter, a few thousand—for what is a cipher to luxuriant fancy?—to drop bombs on the Bank of England, reduce London to ashes, destroy dock-yards and arsenals, and then leisurely send the British fleet to the bottom by raining tons of dynamite down the funnels of battle-ships; and a ton or two of dynamite in the vitals of a ship would seriously interfere with its internal economy. These dashing exploits are still in the future. Neither the Germans have claimed nor their opponents have admitted that the expensive and unwieldy air-ships have been of the slightest value as a weapon of offense. They took no part in reducing the forts at Liège and Namur, they have destroyed not a single man or gun on the field of battle, they have blown up no bridges, they have brought no harm to any ship, the great dock-yards and arsenals and depots of the allies have not been damaged by Zeppelin fire. All that they have done has been to violate the usages of civilized war by taking the lives of women and children in an open city, in wrecking houses, and doing some other minor damage, and in spreading panic. The same results could have been obtained, if they were worth attaining, by simpler and less costly means. I venture no opinion what the Zeppelins may do before the war is over. I simply record the fact that up to the present time they have not justified the great claims of their inventor.

The aeroplane, on the other hand, has more than realized expectations. The British and French General Staffs never placed any faith in the aeroplane as an offensive weapon, but regarded it of great value for scouting purposes. As a scout the aeroplane has superseded cavalry, and been able to obtain information no cavalry could secure, as the cavalry scouts were seldom able to break through the enemy's screen, and were forced to draw conclusions from long-range

observations. From the aeroplane trained observers can see the whole theater of operations unrolled before them and bring to headquarters not hearsay information, but facts; the air scouts can ascertain the number and disposition of the enemy's forces; they can tell a commander where his own line is in danger or his antagonist is wavering; they can direct artillery fire. While the Zeppelins have thus far done none of the things expected of them, the Germans have been excellently served by their aeroplanes, in some respects, I believe, better than the French or English. There will undoubtedly be a large increase in the aerial divisions of all great armies. The importance of the aeroplane is one of the great lessons of the war.

But perhaps the greatest lesson of all, and withal the saddest, is the scant value to be attached to treaties, the little reliance to be placed upon the plighted word of kings, the mockery of rulers talking peace, peace, when there is no peace. To-day, as in the past, nations must rely on their own strength, on their courage, on their fortitude. Now, as since the dawn of creation, a people must suffer if it would preserve national existence, if it is to remain master of its destiny, if death is less to be feared than the conqueror. Belgium fighting to resist the aggressor, its right arm made strong as was that of David when he stood unafraid before Goliath, is a lesson the world will not soon forget, the old lesson of sacrifice, of heroic devotion; the lesson that arbitration treaties will not change nor peace pacts alter humanity. Condemn war as we may, the lesson of civilization is the ability of a nation to fight when not to fight would be dishonor and the loss of its cherished heritage.

A. MAURICE LOW.